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U.S. IS NOW FACING LEBANON DECISION

Aides Say a 'Judgment Call' Is Due on Avenging Marines

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 17 — Now that Israel and France have attacked the pro-Iranian group that is believed responsible for the terrorist attacks on their troops and the American marines in Lebanon, the time has come for the Reagan Administration to decide whether it will do the same, high-ranking officials said today.

The White House had vowed at the time the 239 servicemen were killed Oct. 23 that those responsible would be punished. Since then, the United States has increased its strength in the eastern Mediterranean to some 40 ships, including 3 carrier task forces with 300 planes.

Reportedly No Decision

Administration officials said there was more than enough firepower if the decision were made to carry out the threat to retaliate. But they said the decision was still being considered even though one had to be made soon.

"Up to now, we have put off a decision for many reasons," an Administration official said, "including not wanting to have an American attack interfere with the President's Asian trip. But now, we have to make a judgment call whether we should follow the Israeli and French over Lebanon."

A senior State Department official said today that "there is a readiness" within the highest levels of the Administration to order carrier-based A-7 fighter jets into action against the Baalbek area, which has been attacked on consecutive days by Israeli and French fighter-bombers.

Intelligence Agencies Agree

By the end of October, American and French intelligence officials said they were convinced that the Shiites around Baalbek had played the key role in the attacks on their positions. The Israelis joined in that assessment after the explosion in Tyre at an Israeli installation on Nov. 4.

Several Arab countries, such as Egypt, urged Washington to temper its response, so as not to inflame anti-American passions among Arabs. In deciding on what to do, the Administration stopped talking about retaliation for the bombing, but started saying that any military action would be "defensive" and intended to prevent another such terrorist attack.

The French accepted this approach, and in justifying the attack today the French Defense Ministry said it was carried out "to prevent new terrorist attacks." American officials said that if American bombers were sent, the same justification would be offered.

A White House official said he could not say what the United States would do, but he offered what he said was the "philosophical framework" in which any decision will be made.

"The Reagan Administration is concerned about a rise in terrorism and in particular, state-sponsored terrorism," he said. "The United States opposes terrorism wherever it may be. There is a general feeling that one should not be passive before or after an attack."

American officials said they were aware that military strikes against Shiite positions in the Bekaa, the valley in eastern Lebanon, could result in retaliation against the American marines, as well as against the French and the Israelis.